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school districts, for instance, indicated a strong correlation between black representation and the hiring of blacks to fill top administrative posts, according to the researchers.

The data "strongly suggest that blacks on the school board are able to create opportunities for other blacks in administrative positions," concluded Kenneth Meier, Joseph Stewart Jr., and Robert England in *Race, Class and Education. (See Education Week, Nov. 11, 1987.)*

Black political clout, the study asserted, creates a "developmental sequence" in which black superintendents recruit additional black principals, who in turn hire and promote more black teachers.

Increases in the number of black teachers, the three researchers added, tends to lower the number of black students assigned to special programs for slow learners.

In a 1980 study, the Southern Regional Council said it found strong links between black political and administrative control and improved services in predominantly black schools in Georgia and Alabama.

According to Steve Suitts, the S.R.C.'s executive director, the council found that school systems with black leadership reported significantly fewer student-discipline problems than districts run by whites.

Proportional Representation?

Still, many conservative legal scholars criticize the push to replace existing at-large systems on philosophical grounds.

These critics contend that the civil-rights community is actually seeking an ironclad guarantee of proportional representation by race. Such a quota system, they argue, is itself undemocratic.

Other observers question whether black voters have been well served in the push by civil-rights activists to create separate political districts with black majorities.

In at-large jurisdictions, blacks may be a minority, but they can wield "effective veto power" by supporting some white candidates over others, argued Mr. Sabato, the political-science professor at the University of Virginia.

Once black voters are removed from their districts, he added, white politicians no longer have to consider their views. And because abolishing at-large elections only ensures blacks a minority of seats on a board, the white majority can continue to hold most of the power.

"You end up trading real influence for a few black faces around the table," he said.

But Armand Durfner, a political consultant and civil-rights lawyer in South Carolina, strongly rejected that argument. Any capable elected official, he asserted, learns to make deals, trading favors and votes to advance a political program.

Adroit use of such tactics, he said, can persuade white leaders to support black goals, such as a more equitable distribution of resources between largely white and largely black schools.

"Anybody who holds a seat, who holds a vote, has something to offer," Mr. Durfner said.

Costly Battles

But while political clout may be valuable, it can also be expensive. The costs of a protracted voting-rights suit can be a formidable burden for both sides, lawyers noted.

UPI/Bettmann Newsphotos

Black residents of Jackson, Miss., registering to vote in 1965, after passage of Voting Rights Act.

In Midland, Tex., for instance, a pending case could end up costing the plaintiffs as much as a half a million dollars in legal fees and other costs, according to Mr. Rios, the lawyer who is handling the case.

The steep price of litigation is leading some civil-rights groups to take aim at large groups of governmental agencies, instead of taking action against them individually.

But high costs are also bringing an increasing number of districts to the bargaining table, lawyers said.

The 1982 amendments and last year's Supreme Court ruling in the *Gingles* case reportedly have made government officials more willing to settle out of court.

"I think a lot of defendants have seen the handwriting on the wall," said Ms. Karlan, the L.D.E.F. attorney. "They don't want to waste money on a fight they can't win."

Still, the litigation process is, as one education advocate put it, "a mighty slow boat to social change." Court proceedings and settlement talks, lawyers noted, can take years, allowing government authorities to wage a war of attrition against meagerly funded plaintiffs.

Civil-rights lawyers charged that the Justice Department has helped preserve discriminatory systems by declining to challenge election laws on its own. The department, once an aggressive litigator, has become reluctant to sue under the Reagan Administration, they claimed.

A spokesman for the Justice Department's civil-rights division denied those charges, saying the department had taken action against a number of local governments in recent years.

'Groundwork' for Gains

But with or without its participation, some experts contended that the battle over at-large races and other election practices is actually nearing its end—ironically, as a result of the movement's own successes.

Voting-rights lawyers, these analysts said, have nearly run out of localities to sue. In most of the remaining communities, blacks are not numerous enough to claim election districts of their own.

Most voting-rights activists reject that analysis. But even the staunchest say they recognize that the day will eventually come when black political gains can only be won at the polls, and not in the courtroom.

"The assumption," said the A.C.L.U.'s Mr. McDonald, "is that all of this will lay the groundwork for coalition-building and for mutual respect based on power-sharing."

Push Is On To Overturn Laws in North and West

While efforts to overturn unfair election laws have been largely focused on the South—the traditional battleground for civil-rights conflicts—blacks and other minority-group voters are beginning to challenge the political status quo in a number of communities in Northern and Western states.

A recent round of court cases in Illinois, for instance, has created new black-majority districts for school boards and other governmental bodies in several cities, allowing blacks to win seats on those panels for the first time in this century.

And other racial groups protected by federal civil-rights law, such as Hispanics and Native Americans, are moving in various locales to increase their representation on school boards and other local government bodies.

For years, civil-rights advocates note, these groups have faced many of the same obstacles to political power that have confronted blacks—discriminatory housing patterns, dilution of voting strength, and white hostility.

Hispanic voters in Texas have been especially aggressive in seeking relief in the courts, according to Rolando Rios, a San Antonio-based lawyer who has argued more than 40 such cases over the past 10 years.

Mr. Rios is currently embroiled in a prolonged battle against school officials in Midland, Tex., a city of about 90,000 in the western part of the state.

Despite the district's sizable Hispanic minority, the Midland school board is completely Anglo-American, Mr. Rios said. He blamed this on an at-large election system that allows the Anglo majority to choose all of the board's members.

Such a system, he charged, helps perpetuate a near monopoly on political control by the affluent, white-collar Anglos who work for the many oil companies with offices in Midland.

The school board, Mr. Rios noted, controls the property tax levied on the city's substantial number of expensive homes. "That's a bastion of power which the local establishment is unwilling to give up," he said.

In several other Texas communities, Hispanics are waging similar battles, Mr. Rios said.

Native Americans, too, are pressing for change, according to other voting-rights activists. Laughlin McDonald, the Southern regional director for the American Civil Liberties Union, said Indian voters recently won a court decision in Big Horn County, Mont., banning at-large elections there.

Changes in the federal voting-rights law, which eased the burden of proof for plaintiffs, have helped spur the growth of litigation outside the South, legal experts said.

Before the Congress amended the law in 1982, they noted, minority voters were required to prove that voting laws were passed with discriminatory intent. But this was especially difficult for minority groups other than blacks, because, for the most part, they had not suffered under the same kind of legally sanctioned segregation that affected Southern blacks.

The historical record of these "Jim Crow" laws, the experts explained, often provided black plaintiffs with damning evidence of biased intent, evidence that was not available to other minority groups.

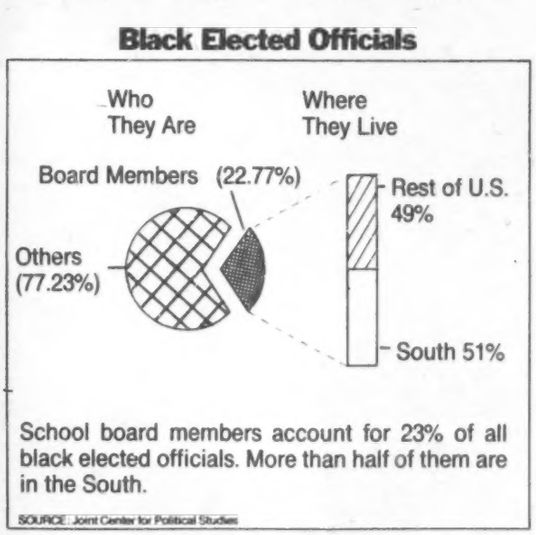
But some legal experts caution that this single historical interpretation can be overstated. Mr. McDonald, for instance, noted that Native Americans in Montana were legally denied the right to vote until 1924.

"We have documented instances of intimidation and obstruction by local voting authorities as recent as a few years ago," he said.

James Craven, the lawyer handling the Illinois cases, made much the same point about discrimination in Northern cities. The city of Springfield, a defendant in one of those cases, maintained separate schools, hospitals, and even cemeteries for blacks for many years, he noted.

Segregation, he said, "may have not been as intentional or as pervasive [as in the South], but the impact was the same." —w.s.

Black Elected Officials


Who They Are
Where They Live
Board Members (22.77%)
Others (77.23%)
Rest of U.S. 49%
South 51%
School board members account for 23% of all black elected officials. More than half of them are in the South.
SOURCE: Joint Center for Political Studies